



Unfinished conversations: A tribute to Sonja Luehrmann (1975–2019)

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Dedicated to Philipp (b. 2007), Vera (b. 2010), and Lukas (b. 2016).

Note from the Editors

Angie Heo, Jeanne Kormina

Sonja Luehrmann, anthropologist and historian, passed away from cancer in Vancouver Canada on August 24, 2019. As her colleagues and friends, we mourn the loss of a brilliant intellect, distinctive voice, and generous soul. The third and youngest daughter of Dieter and Renate Lührmann, she grew up with her sisters Silke and Susanne in Cyriaxweimar, a village outside of Marburg, Germany. She began her training as an anthropologist at Johann Wolfgang Goethe University Frankfurt where she obtained her MA in 2000 before heading to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor where she began her doctoral studies in anthropology and history in 2002. Under the supervision of Alaina Lemon, Webb Keane, William Rosenberg, and Douglas Northrop, she wrote her dissertation on Soviet atheism and the complex affinities between secularism and post-Soviet religious revival in Russia's Upper Volga region. After obtaining her PhD in 2009, Sonja went on to Vancouver where she held a Killiam Postdoctoral Research Fellowship position at the University of British Columbia before joining the faculty in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Simon Fraser University in 2011. For her next eight years at Simon Fraser, Sonja was

a teacher, mentor and colleague, eventually becoming the editor-in-chief of Canada's leading anthropology journal *Anthropologica* and the PI for a prestigious Social Science Research Council research project on prayer and Orthodox Christianity. Alongside her impressive leadership in research and scholarship, Sonja made her home in Vancouver with her husband Ilya Vinkovetsky and their three children.

During her brief professional career, Sonja achieved an astoundingly prolific publication record. From 2000 to 2019, she published three single-authored monographs and one edited volume, in addition to over 40 articles in English, German, and Russian. Sonja's first book, *Alutiiq Villages Under Russian and U.S. Rule* (University of Alaska Press, 2008), based on her MA thesis, offers a comparative analysis of colonization of the Alutiiq people in what is now south-central Alaska. In her second book, *Secularism Soviet Style: Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic* (Indiana University Press, 2011), her doctoral dissertation research became a pathbreaking monograph on atheism and inter-religious relations across the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. This was one of her key works that secured Sonja's position as a leading voice in the fields of history, religion, and Eastern European studies. Her third book, *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge*, (Oxford University Press, 2015) won the Waldo Gifford Leland Award of the Society of American Archivists for its masterful and fine-grained analysis of how Soviet-era archives produced and ordered knowledge about religion and anti-religion. Finally, Sonja's edited volume, *Praying with the Senses: Contemporary Orthodox Christian Spirituality in Practice* (Indiana University Press, 2017), convened various approaches to Orthodox materiality from traditions found in the Middle East, South Asia, and Eastern Europe. Throughout these works, Sonja established her commitments to the disciplines of history and anthropology, synthesizing original research materials from her ethnographic fieldwork, archival sources, and oral histories. Seen all together, her published monographs attest to her versatility and her ever-expanding domains of expertise.

In this collective tribute, we have assembled a group of Sonja's mentors, colleagues, and friends each of whom provides a different angle on her scholarship and traces a different arc across various stages in her academic career. It is our hope that these multi-faceted representations of Sonja will offer a more wholistic portrait of her methodological rigour and theoretical imagination as well as her scholarly persona. Sonja's life was cut tragically short at the age of 44 years and with the lost future of another project of anti-abortion activism and the gendered moralities of motherhood. With great sadness at Sonja's passing, we are heartened that the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Simon Fraser University, in consultation with her family, has created the Sonja Luehrmann Memorial Fund to support the annual Dr. Sonja Luehrmann Memorial Lecture series (<https://give.sfu.ca/ways-to-give/fund/sonja-luehrmann-memorial-fund>). We are also glad that SOYUZ (the Postsocialist Cultural Studies Network) will name its annual competition for the best article on the culture, history, and politics of postsocialism by a junior scholar after Sonja Luehrmann. The following tributes are yet another mere attempt to honour her intellectual contributions for our scholarly community and for those who will hold her memory dear for the rest of their lives. We are grateful to Ilya Vinkovetsky for his help in our work on this written commemoration. It is to Ilya's and Sonja's children – Philipp, Vera, and Lukas – that we dedicate this issue.

Sonja Luehrmann beyond Russia and beyond religion

Douglas Rogers

Sonja Luehrmann will be remembered most often for her marvellous writings on religion and secularism. These were certainly the most common topics of my conversations with her. Sonja and I were only a couple years apart in graduate school at the University of Michigan, and our exchanges about each other's proposals, drafts, dissertations, and then books, long outlasted our time in Ann Arbor. Sonja was the most gentle and insightful of critics, her suggestions taking the form of nudges rather than disagreements. The full import and, indeed, wisdom of her comments usually took me a good long time to reckon with – or decide that I just wasn't up to the challenge. In going back through some of our correspondence this fall, I was therefore surprised to find a moment when, at least as far as I can reconstruct through a hazy memory and fragmentary email trail, Sonja was uncharacteristically exasperated.

The topic was not religion or secularism at all. In what must have begun as an in-person conversation and then spilled over into email, we were talking about the shape and future of a field we shared: the study of so-called postsocialisms. What, really, was it? What was the meaning of and/or the expiry date on the 'post'? Was this really even the best label? How to connect postsocialisms to, and show their relevance for, other domains of scholarship, usually about other areas of the world, that were much more established and, it seemed, not always so interested? Others who work in this field will recognize this apparently unbanishable conversation. From the late-aughts timing of this exchange with Sonja, I suppose I was beginning to think about what would become my own entry in this conversation (Rogers 2010), but Sonja was quite clear and insistent in her opinion of the whole topic: stop the hand wringing and the branding efforts and have the confidence to just do the intellectual work. Follow history and ethnography where they lead and let the analytical questions develop along the way. No gentle nudges here!

Doing just this kind of intellectual work was, not surprisingly, what Sonja was engaged in at the time, and one of the things she continued to do throughout her career. An important part of the legacy she leaves us is a set of publications that linked the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia to more transnational and/or global processes – and from there to some pressing methodological and analytical questions – in highly original ways. Consider three examples, running from graduate school to some of her most recent work, bookends to a decade of astonishing productivity.

My memory is pretty clear on my reaction when Sonja told me, walking across campus one day, that she was working on a seminar paper on the Asiatic mode of production: 'Really? You're kidding, right?' But she was not kidding at all, and it wasn't long before the *Slavic Review* published Sonja's 'Russian Colonialism and the Asiatic Mode of Production: (Post-) Soviet Ethnography Goes to Alaska' (Luehrmann 2005). In the first sentence of this article, Sonja diplomatically sets aside the then-popular questions of how Soviet ethnography and Soviet nationalities policy were tightly entangled. Instead, she builds her study around the writings of a single Soviet ethnographer, Iurii Ivanovich Semenov, and his key concept of 'politarianism.' Politarianism is Semenov's term for an exploitative, state-centred political economy in which the state owns the means of production. (He preferred this term to the 'Asiatic mode of production' because he found it operative

far from Asia.) Sonja's analysis deftly shows the ways in which Semenov's analytical stance was a complicated one to take in the Soviet Union in the 1970s. Would a publication about an exploitative state-centred political economy be read as a critique of the Soviet socialist state? Sonja insists that these complications must be understood without reducing Soviet ethnographers' use of concepts in the historical materialist repertoire to ideological parroting or manoeuvring: historical materialist concepts like the Asiatic mode of production could captivate Soviet ethnographers in good part because they were intellectually interesting and helped them understand the world. To only read degrees of 'loyalty' to the Soviet state into this (as, for instance, Sonja suggests Ernest Gellner did in his *Soviet and Western Anthropology*) is to miss a great deal of the picture.

So far, so good. But Sonja goes much further, demonstrating what it would mean to follow through on her own advice to her readers to carefully historicize intellectual concepts. Semenov's polarism, in her article, ricochets around the world and across the decades, escaping from its origins in the Soviet ethnography of the 1960s and 1970s to inform broader Soviet intellectual currents in the Thaw era; debates about 'economic anthropology' in the Soviet Union and the West; post-Soviet historical debates about Alaskan colonial history (via engagement with Andrei Grinev's 1999 modification of the concept into 'colonial polarism'); central concepts in the anthropology of socialisms and postsocialisms (via engagement with Caroline Humphrey's and Katherine Verdery's discussions of socialist property regimes); and more. What emerges is a masterful and somewhat dizzying illustration of her advice to me: skip the branding, follow the intellectual trail, and the links between Russian and/or Soviet topics and a wider world will emerge.

In all of its close-knit complexity, 'Russian Colonialism and the Asiatic Mode of Production' is not for the faint of heart – or for the undergraduate classroom. However, 'Mediated Marriage: Internet Matchmaking in Provincial Russia' (Luerhmann 2004), another early article of Sonja's, has become a staple of my Russia-focused syllabi over the years. Based on ethnography at Virginia, an internet matchmaking company based in Yoshkar-Ola, the capital of the Mari El Republic, Sonja provides a succinct and sophisticated reading of post-Soviet gender politics that upends stereotypes about 'mail-order brides.' In Sonja's account, Virginia and its Russian (including Tatar and Mari) clients are best understood not only in terms of post-Soviet femininity (e.g. women marketing themselves for foreign 'consumers,' with its links to questions of trafficking), but in the context of a much larger, and much more illuminating, gendered crisis in provincial Russia. Virginia is suspended between anxieties about the declining 'quality' of Russian men – increasingly unemployed, alcoholic, or otherwise left behind after the turbulent 1990s – and countervailing anxieties about women's reproductive capacities being outsourced to non-Russians. ('Girls, don't marry foreigners – support a domestic producer!' reads the article's epigraph, borrowed from a department store mug.) For undergraduates in need of basic orientation in the analysis of gender after socialism, this is an excellent start.

'Mediated Marriage' then goes on to show that, on the other end of the correspondence flowing through Virginia – and providing translators, travel agents, and many others with much-needed employment – is another deeply felt crisis of gender. Many of the Western men searching for Russian wives are convinced that they are also beset by a crisis. The perceived decreasing femininity and domesticity of Western women have sent these men to Virginia and other similar websites, bringing with them their

ideas of Russian women as still in possession of 'traditional' femininity. This gendered desire emanating out of 'the West' is, of course, not only directed toward Russia, but Sonja makes the crucial point that racial and gender categories intersect powerfully here: the perceived whiteness of Russian women makes them preferable to many American men because it fits with American racial hierarchies more snugly than 'Asian' women. I have found no better way to introduce early-career undergraduates to the analysis of gender in and beyond post-Soviet Russia. As I re-read this piece today, in fact, it also seems to me that efforts to understand U.S. – Russia relationships in the Trump era could do much worse than begin with the framework that Sonja deploys here: ethnographically-grounded yet international, multiply gendered, and thoroughly inflected by racialized hierarchies.

Finally, to religion and secularism. Somewhere in my files, I have a folder of photocopies about Soviet-era Old Belief from my visit to the Keston Institute Archive – the 'counter archive' of dissident and samizdat ('self-published') religious documents that features in the final chapter in Sonja's *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge* (2015). Surely, I thought when I made my appointment to visit Keston, which was at that point (in the late 1990s) based in north Oxford, this would be a gold mine of important and useful information about my topic. But I recall leaving mystified and a bit awed by the documents and their organization. For years thereafter, I took out, stared at, and put away that folder of photocopies, and have always regretted not having figured out a way to incorporate any Keston materials into my work. It has been twenty-odd years, but Sonja has finally helped me understand what I missed, and a good deal more as well.

Broadly speaking, Sonja's visit to the Keston files in their current home at Baylor University serves, in that last chapter of *Religion in Secular Archives*, the same structural role as the reception in the West of Soviet concepts or politarism and the gender ideologies of Western men seeking Russian brides. That is, it steps out of Soviet and post-Soviet dynamics narrowly understood to open up a larger connections, divergences, and epistemic labyrinths that enable Sonja to work on a much larger analytical and methodological canvas. In this case, she counterpoises the organizing principles and guiding ideas of the Keston counter archive with those of a Soviet state archival apparatus, suggesting that the Keston archive is best seen a collaborative effort between dissident believers and their Western advocates to create a very specific form of religious knowledge. As part of this collaboration, the practice of document collection at Keston actively obscured – for the safety of its dissident sources – standard archival principles and expectations such as a focus 'provenance' of documents. This must be why I kept staring helplessly at that folder: I could never make these sources speak to a social history pegged to a time and place. Sonja demonstrates that I was just reading them the wrong way, that this is not – often intentionally so – the kind of knowledge they enable.

The larger lessons this book draws about how scholars might use archives to write (secular?) histories of religion are profound. But I think her audience should be still larger. As excitement about the 1990s opening of the Soviet archives fades further and further from view (or is newly closed off), more and more historical scholarship on the Soviet-era uses multiple and varied archives from around the world. Yet that scholarship, along with me and my Keston folder, still largely fails to register the multiple ideologies and logics that animated these archives' making, re-making, and interaction. *Religion in Secular Archives*, in sum, opens up some new questions and lines of investigation for

doing Soviet and Russian history. Indeed, these lessons apply to anyone writing in the genre of secular history.

Reading these three pieces of Sonja's together helps me understand why she was so exasperated with meta-debates about the nature of 'postsocialisms.' They cramped her insistent, roving, brilliant historical and ethnographic imagination, her determination to follow her chosen topics wherever they led. I am terribly sad that Sonja will no longer be choosing new intellectual paths herself, and tremendously grateful for the ways in which she will continue to shape mine.

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Atheists teaching religion to the faithful

Webb Keane

The most challenging undergraduate course for me to teach is the introduction to the anthropology of religion. Early in my teaching career I had discovered that the anthropologist's pedagogical task was no longer to shake up the provincial American bourgeoisie by revealing the diversity of human realities. This was not news to our students – indeed, that message was all too familiar. Some people eat dogs, we don't. We sell our labour by the hour, others do not. Cultivating a version of what Herbert Marcuse called 'repressive desublimation', many students responded with self-protective tolerance: to each their own. Once that's acknowledged, we can proceed to engage in parallel play and ignore one another.

But religion is a different matter. To be sure, although America is a famous exception to the irreligion of industrialized countries, my students are more likely to acknowledge a vague 'spirituality' than allegiance to a formal religious institution. Yet religion still garners slightly nervous respect. Moreover, our increasingly international classrooms display highly visible signs of affiliations – Sikh turbans, Muslim hijabs – once largely confined to documentary ethnographic films. And of course post 9/11 and the 2016 US election, otherness is not quite as tame as it used to be.

Aiming for a sober tone, I start the class by posing as a die-hard positivist, stressing objectivity and the scientific attitude. But, as Matthew Engelke (2002, 5) points out, our core method of fieldwork, with the social relationships and host of suspended beliefs on which it depends, renders this distancing almost unsustainable. And the discerning student will notice this scientism is quickly undermined by the first set of readings. There, Katherine Ewing, reporting her mystical experiences during fieldwork with Sufis, writes of 'a refusal to acknowledge that the subjects of one's research might actually

know something about the human condition that is personally valid for the anthropologist' (1994, 571). In contrast, Jonathan Z. Smith (1982) tells us that scholarly integrity requires distance, for it is only from afar that we can see the resemblances among, say, the Jonestown massacre, Ghost Dance, and Bacchanalian frenzy. So, which is it? Here we turn to Susan Harding's (1987) account of her meeting with an American right-wing evangelical preacher – someone diametrically opposed to everything she stands for. A masterful rhetorician, he gradually turns her ethnographic interview into his act of witnessing. So powerful is his narrative that even she finds herself completely in its sway, if only momentarily. Through these juxtapositions I hope to convey three things. First, in principle, people are not fixed 'inside' or 'outside' a religion in any simple sense but are inherently mobile. Second, the concrete practices of religion work on that mobility, either shifting people from one stance to another or holding them in place. Third, anthropological insight itself depends neither on the intimacy of the insider nor the estrangement of the distanced observer, but on taking advantage of this general capacity for constant movement between these poles (see Keane 2003).

We might call this approach genealogical. As the philosopher David Owen (2002) writes, Foucauldian genealogy is in principle dialogic, altering perspectives by juxtaposing one way of seeing with another. We are not in search of the correct picture, but rather judge the respective merits and failings of different perspectives in light of what matters to us, here and now. Owen contrasts this to the Frankfurt School's ideology critique, which seeks to unmask false consciousness and reveal truth. One might take this to be the goal of the scientist I had posed as – someone who would debunk religion, much like Leslie White, my distant predecessor at Michigan, known as the village atheist, whose lectures titillated the children of Midwestern Presbyterians in the 1950s. A similar self-certainty also, of course, marks certain styles of religious doctrine. Sometimes the militancy of the faithful and their opponents can be hard to distinguish (Luerhmann 2011).

Owen maintains that genealogy is not normative. Yet genealogy *does* presuppose the values of dialogue and critique as contributing to human self-governance. And self-governance is not to be taken for granted. After all, does not Karma or the Dharma, the will of God or Allah, trump human agency? Disclaimers notwithstanding, the practice of genealogy implies an underlying disciplinary normativity. This normativity cohabits with the anthropological ethic to 'take others seriously' and its core paradox: our openness to alternative worlds can lead us to take seriously those who reject the value of that very openness which leads us to take them – and thus their rejection of openness – seriously (Keane 2018).

If we're lucky, our teaching draws real challengers. The final essay for my religion course requires students to attend, describe, and analyse a religious ceremony of a faith different from any of one's own background. The task is popular with students. But one day, a young man whom I'll call 'Todd' came up to me after class. A certain type – reversed baseball cap, sports fan sweatshirts, a polite but unengaged manner – he'd struck me as a regular guy who was taking the course to fulfil a distributional requirement. Not so. I had always offered students an alternative if they were troubled by this assignment, but over the years no one had ever taken me up on it until now. Nervously, Todd explained that a faithful Christian, he could not participate in the worship of an alien god. It would blaspheme his own God. I suggested that merely observing need not mean worshipping. Todd replied that there's no way to know whether even being present would

count as complicity. This was serious business and he was not going to put himself at risk. Foisted on my own tolerance, I assigned him to write an explanation of his position and to interview both his own pastor and two non-Christian leaders about it, which he did in earnest. Bravely, Todd concluded the essay by challenging the implicit methodological atheism that makes it perfectly safe, even inconsequential, for me to approach foreign gods. As if they didn't matter, at least for me.

Now one might follow the 'ontological turn' and conclude that Todd simply inhabits a different reality than mine. But if that were so, would not he be safe with other gods, since they are also located in ontologies other than his? How could they impinge on him? One can imagine various answers to this question. Perhaps, for instance, others' 'gods' are really satanic, although in his mild-mannered way, Todd was also worried that his presence as a non-believer in others' faith might be offensive to them. However that may be, it is clear that whatever else was going on here, Todd's own ethical values place loyalty over those of constantly shifting perspectives.

In his own way, Todd is fulfilling the anthropological mandate to 'take others seriously'. For Todd, that means not feeling free to move from one position to another just as one pleases. What does it mean for anthropologists? Should we 'make Christian categories and materials central to [anthropology's] projects of philosophical and cultural critique' (Robbins and Engelke 2010, 624)? Could one do so without taking up the commitments that go along with those categories and materials? And does this avoid the anthropological paradox? These questions pervaded my interactions with Sonja Luehrmann, whose premature death prompts this essay. Daughter of a German Lutheran theologian, she spent her early childhood in a utopian Christian community sheltering the mentally disabled where he worked. It seems the family-members were not especially observant church-goers, but sometime during her undergraduate years in Frankfurt, she became serious about her faith. By the time she embarked on graduate studies at the University of Michigan, she told me she was attending services on a weekly basis.

As one of her advisors, during our endless email exchanges while she was preparing for qualifying exams in 2004, I remarked that certain arguments generate more heat than light. She responded,

What's wrong with heat? The more I read of the so-called anthro of religion, the more I appreciate what a sign of deep intellectual engagement it was when Luther threw his ink pot at the devil. Compared to all the self-flagellant agonizing over sharing or not sharing the beliefs of ones subjects – as if that would change anything ... what this country needs is not anthropologists working on religion, but a tradition of considering religion as something worthy of intellectual effort at all

Dismissing the positional anxieties endemic to academics at the time, she seems to square the circle.

Now one might say that this over-intellectualizes religious experience, but Luehrmann wasn't immune to the aesthetic and emotional powers of religious materiality. She wrote years later of encountering the sensory overload of Russian Orthodox services: 'At some point, my body simply decided to end the experience: my eyes went so black that I could no longer tell if the candle in my hands was burning or extinguished' (2017, 1). Lutheranism is more austere, but its appeal for Luehrmann surely included something well beyond the intellectual effort, for she told me of her appreciation of the regularity,

the calendrical progression, and the ritual practices of her weekly round. These neither excluded nor were excluded by intellectual effort.

Luehrmann wasn't one to bandy about clever paradoxes – she was quite serious when she wrote, again during her qualifying exams: 'One can't always freely choose the external authorities one imposes upon oneself.' The unfree choice as the agent of something imposed on one summarizes a condition of fundamental contingency. Bringing this to bear on the anthropological paradox, I might say that a certain methodological atheism is an external authority that I impose on myself. To work as a social scientist one takes on certain ways of seeing and speaking which allow us to talk with one another. This requires a certain humility: we are not in a position to make ontological judgments that go beyond the limited premises of our field and its methods.

I am comfortable with the possibilities for knowledge gained from the third-person perspective of the external observer – and their modesty. At the same time, no one is *only* a social scientist. That cannot be a full-fledged first-person position. It's a mere truism to point out that even quantum physicists still drive their cars in a deterministic world and astronomers still see the sun rising in the east. These are phenomenological features of the first-person perspective, the world as I inhabit it. More than perception is at stake, however. My capacity for action depends on being involved with things toward which I have a first-person stance. Looking at this from one angle, Jon Bialecki asserts that 'to ignore God as an agent in the world is ... overlook an often vital mode of [people's] engagement with the world and specifically of the various objects in which they are enmeshed' (2014, 33). But taking in the first-person perspective needn't require us to make ontological judgments about God, objects, and agents. Rather, it attends to an aspect of how people live. For viewing the world from the disengaged perspective of the third person fails to provide me (the first person) with a *motive* to act (Keane 2016, 259–262). The first person is irreducibly contingent – it provides one with the history, language, knowledge, capacities, expectations, relationships, etc. that produce commitments and motivate actions. With their varying degrees of subtlety and suppleness, Todd and Sonja accepted that contingency.

Personal experience does not itself religion make. Although Ewing speaks of religion as knowing something '*personally* valid for the anthropologist' (emphasis mine), Luehrmann's invocation of an 'external authority' should also remind us that the first person is not an isolated subjectivity but a position in relation to others (Keane 2016). It is fundamentally intersubjective, but also thoroughly embedded in larger socialities and temporalities. As a more general anthropological point, the first-person position does not bestow some epistemic privilege. But what it *does* do is place us in relations to others, whom we must address in the second person, and who in turn reverse roles and address us, and to whom, again, we must respond or fail to respond. This locates us not in an ontology but in the realm of ethical life.

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Bold devotion

Angie Heo

Most anthropologists are familiar with the typically solitary nature of fieldwork and writing up. Adventurous and thoroughly capable, Sonja Luehrmann was one of those rare leaders who could coordinate a collective experience of research and publication for an international team of ethnographers. When she learned that the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) was funding projects on the study of prayer, Sonja fearlessly called on her friends who specialized in various strands of Orthodox Christianity and began building a community of lifelong interlocutors. By the summer of 2013, Sonja was sweeping the six of us – Daria Dubovka, Jeffers Engelhardt, Jeanne Kormina, Vlad Naumescu, Simion Pop, and me – away to glass icon workshops in Nicula Monastery and communist prisons turned into neo-martyrs' shrines in Aiud. In the next summer of 2014, we explored the acoustics of ancient churches as well as panoramic views from the Acropolis, with one of Thessaloniki's more memorable seaside hostels serving as our base for rest and reflection. All the while behind the scenes, in Romania, Greece and elsewhere, Sonja was pumping out grant reports and handling timely reimbursements so that we could get on with our work together (Figure 1).

Throughout our fieldwork and writing collaborations, Sonja struck her trademark balance between unwavering intensity and unassuming quietude. After leading hours of focused discussion on ritual aesthetics or historical differences between the Byzantine and Russian empires, she would steal away for a brisk evening walk by herself in the town, or spend an afternoon with her nose buried in a German text on philosophy and ethics. At that time, I happened to be writing about holy fools in Egypt, those quintessential desert ascetics who feigned sanity to avoid the fatal sin of pride. During one of our dinners in Cluj, I remember observing Sonja awkwardly deflect praise and entertaining the possibility that she may very well be the contemporary embodiment of an



Figure 1. The White Tower of Thessaloniki, August 2014. (Left to right) Angie Heo, Daria Dubovka, Simion Pop, Jeanne Kormina, Nektarios Antoniou, Sonja Luerhmann, Jeffers Engelhardt, Vlad Naumescu.

ancient moral sensibility. She had a weak stomach for excessive attention, and especially, in her direction. In hindsight, I recognize that it was some mysterious quotient of deep, individual strength and principled commitment to fairness that made Sonja such an effective team leader.

In 2017, Sonja's leadership on our multi-year project finally came to fruition in our edited volume *Praying with the Senses* (Luehrmann 2017). To my knowledge, it is the only book on contemporary Orthodox Christianity that covers such an ambitious geographic terrain, from the Middle East and East Africa to South Asia and Eastern Europe. Re-reading her introduction now, I remain captivated by how Sonja artfully links these far-flung regions together through a seventeenth-century travel report. By recounting experiences of prayer by an Arab Orthodox delegation to Constantinople, Romania, Moldavia and Muscovy, she gestures to the ways in which the strange and the familiar, the insider and the outsider, the foreign and the fraternal, come together in tradition and liturgy. In fact, we were the ones who were the travellers making sense of our various encounters with 'other' Orthodox images, namesakes, and monastic rites in Greece and Romania. With subtle style, Sonja's comment applies to both the uniqueness of Orthodoxy's 'unity-in-diversity' doctrine and the complexity of comparative fieldwork encounters.

Sonja was a versatile curator and editor for *Praying with the Senses*, in large part because she was so fluently conversant in anthropology, history and religion. She could read the current state of different fields and pitch our collective strengths to scholarship on aesthetic mediation, pedagogical techniques, and religious pluralism. For the study of Orthodox Christianity in particular, one could make the case that a fine-tuned historical sensibility is a requirement for grasping semblances between the 'Oriental' and 'Byzantine', or for navigating distinctions between the Catholic-Orthodox frontier in the Eastern Christian world. Given her penchant for history and philology, Sonja parsed through the delicate details of theological controversy and assembled a glossary of liturgical terms in Old Church Slavonic, Russian, Greek, Arabic, Amharic, and Sanskrit. She recognized what areas and topics our team was missing and which talented ethnographers – Andreas Bandak and Tom Boylston – we should invite to address our gaps and

enlarge our comparative perspective. With an eye to contemporary sites of the contest, she also included a brief summary of 'competing prayers for Ukraine' after Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Sonja somehow managed to connect the technical and textured nature of prayer to the most politically charged topics on all our minds.

Sonja's expertise in religion as a key perspective on the Cold War signals how I came to know her intellectually and interpersonally. When we first met in Ann Arbor back in 2003, she was a PhD student and I was the prospective student she was hosting in her apartment. In the short period of my stay, Sonja made a lasting impression on me. At that time, she was putting the final touches on her first book manuscript, *Alutiiq Villages Under Russian and U.S. Rule* (Luehrmann 2008), a revision of her MA thesis which drew on Russian Orthodox Church archives to compare contexts of colonial expansion in Alaska's Kodiak Archipelago. I, on the other hand, was still at the larval stage of figuring out what in the world 'Anthro-History' and 'Linguistic Anthropology' actually meant. Despite what initially felt like an insurmountable chasm of experience and erudition, Sonja proved far from intimidating in our conversations, and I quickly learned that we shared core interests in anthropology, theology, and geopolitical imaginaries of 'Asia.' Like me, she was a descendant of Cold War history and divided nationhood, hailing from a family intimately bound to the Protestant work ethic, and ultimately, carrying out her life as a foreigner/ immigrant in North America as long as I had known her. From Ann Arbor onward, needless to say, we became friends and colleagues. Or more precisely, she became somewhat of a career mentor to me, and the two of us developed a friendship along the way, at first sharing hotel rooms at AAA meetings, and later diving into meandering dialogues about love, mourning, and gratitude.

Much of the following fifteen years were filled with email exchanges between us, with article and book drafts attached for feedback. Shortly after filing our dissertations, within months of each other, I remember reading and commenting on Sonja's essays which eventually became 'A Dual Quarrel of Images on Russia's Middle Volga' (2010) and 'The Modernity of Manual Reproduction' (2011). In many ways, the former already anticipated her future leadership on our SSRC Sensory Spirituality project a few years later. It opens with the role of prayer in Russian Orthodoxy and contesting ideologies of prayer as a communicative form of imagined address and sensory mediation. The second article, published in *Cultural Anthropology*, is dedicated to the study of Soviet ideology, its handmade vehicles of material transmission and its political potential for mobilizing social networks. Tackling the classic theoretical issue of reproduction and change, it combines insights from critical theory and semiotics to analyse Soviet and post-Soviet movements. Even now, when I re-read these two very different works, I am struck by Sonja's capacious range of knowledge and her uncanny ability to interpellate multiple reading audiences at once. When I began publishing out of my PhD research, I found Sonja's analysis of pagan-Orthodox-Protestant disputes over image veneration to be a source of inspiration for my writings on the material aesthetics of sectarianism in Egypt. Just this last week, I also drew on her CA article to formulate my lecture on M.M. Bakhtin's 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity' (1924) for the Introduction of Religion students at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Sonja's 'creative consciousness', so to speak, vibrantly lives on through my publications and teaching.

In 2012, I moved to Germany for a luxurious fellowship at the Max Planck Institute where I was initiated into the career of a full-time expatriate and migrant academic. In

the summer of 2014, for the first time in our friendship, I met Sonja not in Ann Arbor or Vancouver where she studied and worked, but in Marburg. A university town, Marburg is where her father Dieter Lührmann taught historical theology and where Sonja spent her life before leaving for further study. For most of her life, Sonja thrived within the orbit of universities, and during my visit at her childhood home in Cyriaxweimar, I tried to imagine what she was like and what else besides studying she did when she was growing up. Her beloved two young children, Philipp and Vera, readily lent flesh to my imagination: after eating their grandmother Renate's summer berry pie, they ran wildly around the living room and the garden, gleefully bathed in Tinti confetti, and napped in the attic bedroom. Sonja was there the whole time of course, quietly attending to others while coordinating behind the noise. I will always remember my visual image of Sonja triumphantly finishing off peer reviews with a pencil and clipboard at her sleeping children's bedside. Hers is a portrait of utter service emanating in all directions.

It might have been that Sonja never felt quite at home anywhere. Some weeks later, when we were hopping across playgrounds in Göttingen's parks, she expressed that although she was German, she had spent most of her adult life away from Germany. A fiercely independent traveller from her early twenties, she had already been a language exchange student in Japan and an archival fieldworker in Alaska, years before she reached Michigan for her doctoral training and British Columbia for her professional career. When I think about her and her daily rhythms, I see that, in many ways, she was her own home, a tireless engine and steady anchor for herself as well as those she gathered around her.

I mourn her passing with a great sense of loss. When I last spoke with Sonja in the fall of 2017, we were on Skype with Jeanne Kormina who was visiting her, Ilya and the kids in Vancouver. Under the fatigue of chemotherapy, Sonja was generous and witty, making wry jokes about Canadian healthcare and inquiring after my new project in Korea. When she told me that she was planning to go to an international conference in Morocco on women's reproduction, I was surprised and not surprised. Yes, she will have just finished chemo, but it was Sonja, and she was far from putting an end to her bold devotion.

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On the importance of having a method: thinking about the (post)secular with Sonja Luehrmann

Vlad Naumescu

In my contribution to this collective tribute, I would like to reflect on secularism and the postsecular, one of the central themes in Sonja's work that will remain a lasting legacy.

It is a chance to acknowledge the important intellectual contribution she has made to the study of religion and secularism and also thank Sonja for the way she has shaped my own thinking about religion, history and secularism and taught me how to bring the archives in conversation with ethnography. After first meeting each other (we were still doing our respective PhD research in postsocialist Russia and Ukraine), we started a meaningful conversation on Orthodox Christianity and secularism that deepened over the years as we engaged in new research, became friends and collaborated on several projects. The depth and clarity of her thinking and the way she combined history and anthropology in her work constitute a model of scholarship that will hopefully influence generations to come.

One may wonder: why still discuss the secular when there's so much talk about the postsecular today? These conversations which tend to be too parochial and shortsighted remain too remote from the realities on the ground that anthropologists like Sonja favoured. The term 'postsecular' itself carries over some of the ambiguity of the secular whose utility as an analytical concept is still questioned today (Starrett 2010). The 'post' is even more problematic: does it refer to a particular historical moment or a moving beyond, a sort of epistemological repositioning following the deconstruction of a myth? Is it an analytical concept, a political doctrine or a new configuration of the secular and the religious? Like other 'posts' familiar to anthropologists, the postsecular is something that can be defined only in reference to the previous condition. Like them, it suggests a transition, possibly a rupture or radical change but by maintaining the relation to that past moment it invites us to search for continuities. Its temporality is only defined in reference to the past so it's not clear if or when it will end or become meaningless. Those of us who studied postsocialism are quite familiar with such questions and they seem to remain still valid today (Müller 2019). Entering a field prefigured by anthropologists of socialism, our generation benefited from the opening of borders and archives, but also inherited the view that this rupture with the past demanded certain continuity: one could not understand one without the other. In this context, the postsocialist (or postsecular?) resurgence of religion posed a challenge to those searching for continuities between the secular-atheist regimes and religious mobilizations that followed.

A close observer of these processes, Sonja has dedicated a lot of attention to Soviet secularism, its actors, politics, pedagogies and ethics as revealed in her book *Secularism, Soviet Style* (2011a). In her fieldwork in the Mari El Republic of Russia, she asked important questions about the place of religion in modernity: What kind of secular modernity was Soviet atheism? What made it so persuasive for the people? And what does it teach us about the present, postsecular condition in Russia and beyond? For this, she looked methodically into Soviet atheism and post-Soviet religious mobilizations, staying close to the ground, moving between the archives and the field, and thinking comparatively about what secular projects across the globe have in common. She studied Soviet atheist propagandists and contrasted them with post-Soviet religious activists by juxtaposing their experiences, skills, and individual trajectories to see how one can contribute to our understanding of the other (to her surprise these often were the same people!). Her approach, which involved a combination of ethnography and archives, was to explore the 'elective affinities' of secular and religious mobilizations, observing their mutual influences and frictions. It put the resilience of the Soviet secular in historical perspective without overemphasizing historical causalities, observing the persistence of form and practices

(methods) used and adapted to new contexts. It made her work stand out among the wealth of studies on secularism and postsocialist religiosity that were to follow.

Sonja was a comparativist in the field as well as in the archive and brought her ethnographic lens to the socialist archives, drawing parallels between the field and the archive, and also between different archives. This method, which proved very productive, is visible throughout her writings but is best grasped in her book *Religion in Secular Archives* (2015a) which places side-by-side oral interviews with the archives of the Soviet Knowledge Society and its counterpart, the Keston Archive of religious dissidence in the former communist states. It allowed her to open up her cases, look for connections and make broader comparisons that revealed more than what she would have gotten from the cases studied individually. In this process, she learned as much about her interlocutors as she learned from them (not surprisingly, the motto in her reflections on method is Adorno's on 'Learning'/ Bildung). Always moving between the archives and the field, she was perfectly aware of the limitations and possibilities they open which she addresses in her essay on method in *Anthrohistory* (2011b), a volume with contributions from her fellow graduates of the History and Anthropology program at Michigan. In this essay, she pushes the comparison beyond fieldwork and archives, drawing parallels between the atheist methodicians she studied and ethnographers. Something we have in common, Sonja noticed, is the anxiety derived from our attempts to bridge apparently incommensurable worlds. What differentiates us is the atheist methodicians' political commitment to change that world steering their pursuits.

The question of method Sonja pursued in the field, in the archives and in her reflections on the discipline was important not only for her interlocutors, Soviet atheists and post-Soviet religious activists but also for anthropologists of postsocialism who were invited to contribute to the transformation of knowledge and societies they studied. We shared this experience as part of a ReSET project on 'Anthropological Approaches to Religion and Secularism' (2010–2013) sponsored by the Open Society Foundations through its Higher Education Support Program. This project brought together young faculty and researchers from the former Soviet Union and a group of 'resource faculty' from the US and Europe meant to help them develop their skills in formulating research projects and teaching curriculum on religion and secularism in the region. The irony of teaching methods to a new generation of post-Soviet scholars has probably not escaped Sonja, and yet the program turned into a wonderful opportunity to develop lasting friendships and a vibrant intellectual community. Our meetings in Georgia and Istanbul were not only opportunities to discuss one another's work and test the literature on secularism against their insights, but also to brainstorm with Sonja and Jeanne Kormina (another ReSET fellow) toward our next project on prayer in Orthodox Christianity (Luehrmann 2017).

Unlike most of us there, Sonja had a deeper understanding of what it meant to study religion in the Soviet Union just one or two generations earlier. Her meaningful encounter with Soviet sociologists of religion in the archives and in real life, which is at the core of her book on archives, represented a courageous move since few anthropologists of/in the region have taken seriously the sociological or ethnographic legacy of the socialist bloc in the postsocialist period – an early exception was the series 'Studying peoples in the people's democracies' sponsored by the MPI for Social Anthropology (Hann, Sárkány, and Skalník 2005; Mihăilescu, Iliev, and Naumović 2008). Rather than dismissing their

work as 'biased', her research on the production of scientific atheism in Russia gave rise to valuable reflections on the parallel endeavours of Western and Soviet sociologists of religion who, on the premise that religion was to disappear, looked at religious phenomena as 'survivals' and evidence for an emerging secular society. Their puzzle, when confronted with the salience of religion on the ground in the 1960–1970s, resembled that of their Western counterparts who discovered the resurgence of religion that came to define the postsecular condition. However, unlike their counterparts, Soviet sociologists went on to produce rich accounts of religious life that pointed to the apparent failure of the state project of secularizing society. Showing how documentation was part of the process of transforming reality, Sonja noticed how Soviet sociologists were sometimes changed by their encounter with religious 'others', subsequently beginning to empathize with their subjects and criticize the state. She thought anthropologists could learn from this 'antagonistic insight' (Luehrmann 2015c) in their relationship with 'repugnant cultural others' such as the Christian fundamentalists described by Susan Harding who became a test case for the anthropology of Christianity.

An important contributor to this literature, Sonja found it strange that anthropologists approached the 'repugnant others' to get a better sense of themselves and produce a self-critique of the secular, liberal roots of the discipline. This 'ethnographic refusal' to look deeper into the religious others puzzled her, a practicing Christian and keen observer of all things religious who approached her interlocutors with humbleness and understanding even when they were less charitable than one would expect. Empathy, with a healthy dose of irony when needed, was a quality that gave a great depth to her work on religion. In one of our frequent exchanges during the writing of our volume on Orthodox prayer, she remarked about the difficulties of doing research on anti-abortion activism in Russia: 'I finally managed to interview the priest who heads the diocese's section for work with medical institutions. He has a degree in German language and literature, and first spent half an hour telling me how he used to admire Germany, but then was disappointed when he went there, and really sees no point in a German trying to understand Russian Orthodoxy. But I seem to have listened to the whole thing with enough humility, so he did answer my questions after that.'

Sonja's most recent research was meant to develop into a book on anti-abortion activism in Russian Orthodoxy. She wrote several articles in this vein that tackled reproductive policies and demographic anxieties in the Soviet Union and Putin's Russia, the emergence of Orthodox pro-life movements as a collaboration between church and state (and parallels with their Western counterparts), and the moral imaginaries that animate her interlocutors traversing Orthodox, Soviet and conservative Christian discourses. Though easily subsumable under postsecular politics, she did not rush to impose that frame over these Orthodox women but attended to their decisions and ways of making sense of their lives even when they were judging the lives of others, including hers. It was part of her 'method' to let the material speak for itself that inspired her choice of 'elective affinities' as a concept for exploring the mutual interdependence of the secular and the religious in *Secularism, Soviet Style* (2011a) or to revisit the overused analogy between communism and religion by looking at the levels of transcendence a society emphasizes at particular times (Luehrmann 2015b). For the new book, she was still searching for inspiration in her research materials, considering anthropologies of the imagination as a possible way to approach the distinct visual cultures of the pro-life movements in Russia and

the US, the projections they had about one another, along with her difficulties in grounding their statements. In another one of our email exchanges, she said, 'There is a lot of back-and-forth mirroring and commenting going on in these interviews, and I hope that acknowledging them as animations or enactments of cultural imaginaries will help me recognize that whether or not people were talking about their lives or about what they thought of the lives of others (or both), they were drawing on patterns and stories in which reproductive choices matter for the kind of person one becomes and the kind of life one lives.' Today, we can only imagine how that book would have looked like if Sonja had the time to complete it. This way, we only remain with the taste of it from her most recent writings and deep gratitude for everything she has done and left for us.

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Absorption in peripheral observation¹

Jeanne Kormina

'Due to her inner strength, she transformed the world around her by her very presence. She multiplied the talents she had received and, hopefully, will hear the promised words "come into the glory of God!"' These were the words that Pavel, one of Sonja's fieldwork friends, used to respond to the news of her death. His reaction differed significantly from the condolences written by other friends and colleagues on social media, as his Facebook entry was written in language infused by religion, making a reference to the Bible (Matthew 25:16-18) and explicitly embracing belief in salvation as a post-life

opportunity. If, for most of us, Sonja's passing marks a tragedy with an absolute end, the point when everything connected to her is converted to history, for people like him, the passing of this threshold opens up new perspectives for the future.

Pavel, now a member of the clergy in one of the Russian Orthodox churches in St. Petersburg, was a recent university graduate in a city in the Volga region when he initially met Sonja through his university professor and, as a young intellectual, a local resident, and an Orthodox believer, became one of her guides to the local culture. At that time Sonja was beginning her new research project on the anti-abortion movement in Russia, with a particular focus on the involvement in this movement of the Orthodox Church. Both Pavel and Sonja took part in a hundred-kilometer long 'Procession of the Cross' (*krestnyi khod*), a walk to a popular sacred site in the region known as 'The Fiery Infants' (*plamennye mladentsy*). The name refers to a nineteenth-century legend about a father who, at this location, burned to death three of his young children. The annual pilgrimage to this shrine is promoted among contemporary Russian Orthodox believers as a pious deed that helps to expiate the sin of abortion in their families (Luehrmann 2017). The majority of the pilgrims were women whose reproductive years happened to be in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period, when abortion was generally viewed as a routine practice of family planning (Luehrmann 2019).

Throughout her academic life, Sonja was studying people who were going through dramatic ideological and social changes. As she wrote about her last research project, 'I am not just studying a small group of activists, but processes of change that are affecting social norms throughout the Russian national space' (ЛЮРМАН 2016, 49). This interest in social change, and how people live locally through its harshness and fluidity, was deeply rooted in her own life experience; born in 1975 in West Germany, she witnessed the rapid post-Berlin Wall changes in her home country. Her family history mattered too – her own grandparents, the school teachers to whom she dedicated her book *Secularism Soviet Style*, lived through several changes of ideological regimes (Luehrmann 2011). Already in high school, she had developed an interest in Russia, perhaps due to the presence of her best friend at the time, a girl from a family of Russian Jewish immigrants.

It is easy to see why, as she initiated her fieldwork in Russia, Sonja became especially interested in the religious lives of post-Soviet people. The prompt for this interest was the ethnographic reality of mass conversion she could see all around her in Mari El (the field of her research, a multi-ethnic and multi-religious republic located in the Upper Volga region of the Russian Federation) and the equipment she brought to her research: Sonja was if we rephrase Max Weber's famous saying, highly *musikalish* when it comes to religion (ЛЮРМАН 2017, 31) and well-prepared to pursue this subject intellectually, as a result of long-term reflection on her own cultural background as a daughter of a prominent Lutheran theologian.

When writing about her fieldwork, Sonja referred to her ethnographic method as 'peripheral observation' rather than the more common anthropological 'participant observation'.

Some anthropologists deliberately stand back during occasions of embodied worship, allowing their visible non-participation to be a mark of their identity as a researcher ... Others find it easier to participate in embodied acts such as singing, dancing, and holding hands, presumed

to be less ideologically charged than sermons, personalized prayers, and verbal testimonials ... I, by contrast, am very conscious that I tend to enter a mode of prayer when others are praying around me, no matter what theological differences or closeness I feel with them. When I am surrounded by people who pray, I tap into a trait that the anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann calls absorption ... a kind of intense attention that can be directed to the outside world as well as to an inner state. It is a way of being associated with novel-reading and listening to music, but also a precondition for the disciplined practice of the [religious] imagination. (Люрман 2017, 28)

Sonja wrote this excerpt for *Antropologicheskii Forum*, a Russian-language and St. Petersburg-based anthropological journal that was established in the mid-2000s by scholars from the European University at St. Petersburg to promote development of anthropological research in Russia and the Russian-speaking world. The journal aims to build bridges between local anthropological traditions, with their strong connections to history on the one hand and literature studies (semiotics especially) on the other, and to anthropology in its 'Western' variants (which are plenty of course). Each issue of the journal devotes half of its pages to a special section called 'Forum' where invited participants, typically specialists in the field from different parts of the world, answer questions on a particular topic suggested by the editors. Sonja participated in two such discussions, but her influence on anthropology in her fieldsite country was not only through these and some other texts published in Russian. She participated in conferences in Moscow and St. Petersburg, reviewed articles for local journals, and served as a consultant for students. This generosity can be understood as the constant process of reciprocity that an anthropologist has with the people she studies, one of the ethical burdens our profession imposes on us. But in Sonja's case, it has always been more about giving than receiving. She never measured, she just worked.

The fieldwork Sonja did for her last research project was difficult, if not traumatic. As she wrote in another essay for the same journal, her 'community under study' consisted of activist groups that are 'scattered across Russia, [often occupying] the position of crazy, but politically necessary idealists in their own dioceses' (Люрман 2016, 49). On the one hand, she wrote,

on a personal level the activists often don't seem so different from the more liberal or leftist groups I have been in contact with: they strategize about ways to get away with mildly illegal things, such as posting stickers in the metro. They try to get themselves and their supporters informed about the legal framework for protest and public outreach in Russia, for example, how far apart activists distributing flyers have to stand to qualify as an 'odinochnyi piket' (solitary picket), and thus not in need of police permission. (Люрман 2016, 48)

On the other hand, their political project was not one she personally supported or would want to promote (not a rare case in anthropological practice). Yet, in addition to this, Sonja was very much aware of

the increasingly more central position of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russian state politics, as well as the hardening stereotype that liberal Russians as well as international audiences hold of the ROC: a powerful monopolist, invested in maintaining the political status quo and taking Russia back to pre-revolutionary gender and sexual norms

so that it seemed ‘increasingly difficult to speak about Church politics in a way that activists as well as external critics would recognize’ (ЖЮРМАН 2016, 48).

Empathy is an important part of any anthropological research; without feeling empathy to our fieldwork friends and interlocutors, with whom we share food and thoughts (when we speak), and bodily experiences such as hunger, physical discomfort caused by cold or heat, or pain in the feet after a long walk to a pilgrimage site, we cannot do our ethnographic work. When Sonja and I met for the last time, just two weeks before she died, we talked, as we had always done, about the future – we both knew it would be short for her, but did not believe that it would be as short as it turned out to be. As we discussed what she intended to work on in the near term, she made it clear that it would not be the pro-life movement; the topic had turned out to be too dark and even frightening. During her fieldwork, she observed too much talk of punishment and discipline, without any traces of Christian love and forgiveness. The women with whom she went to The Fiery Infants were under constant and unjust pressure from two sides – from the Orthodox priests who eagerly translated mundane medical practices of the past into a woman’s personal guilt and unforgivable sin, and from the secular critics, including members of their own families, who criticized these women for their conservatism and even mocked their pious activities as superstitions. Sonja refused to see these women as voiceless victims of church or state oppression; she wanted to write about them as people with their own agency – creativity, will, and pride – and found this task extremely difficult. She agonized over these difficulties and even felt blocked intellectually, which was so uncharacteristic for her. In this particular case, her peripheral observation, informed as it was by her position of intellectual, liberal and feminist principles, made absorption impossible.

So now, what of the future? In the Russian Orthodox tradition that Sonja knew so well, people believe that their loved ones, upon death, part from them gradually. According to a commonly accepted post-life ontology, for forty days her metaphysical persona would be present in the places where she belonged – even availed to communication in some way or another – and after that period, she would start moving into a place of eternal rest and forgetting. Common people do not typically identify this location as Hell or Paradise the way Pavel does; indeed, it is likely that many of Sonja’s Russian interlocutors have a skeptical view about the notion of salvation and eternal life. We live as long as we are remembered, they would say; we live as long as we participate in academic life, the people of our academic tribe may add. This is our way to the future – not to rest in peace, so to say – and I hope Sonja’s future will last long.

Note

1. When citing Sonja Luehrmann’s Russian-language publications in this tribute, I use her words from her original English-language manuscripts that she had submitted to the journal.

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Empathy and the militant middle ground

Catherine Wanner

In the 1990s, as nationalism studies raged and imposed their agendas on research topics across the former Soviet Union, I once heard anthropologist Michael Herzfeld refer to the importance of holding the 'militant middle ground' while engaging in these heated debates. My own anthropological inclinations meant that I was never particularly invested in discussions over whether Russia would continue to collapse along the same lines that the USSR had or whether Ukraine would survive as a state. I never forgot, however, the phrase 'militant middle ground' and the sheer fact that it is indeed important to hold it, especially when investigating politicized and emotionally charged topics, such as religion, which too often lend themselves to prescriptive judgements as to what others *should* do over analysis and understanding of what others *actually do* and why.

I think of Sonja Luehrmann as someone who instinctively gravitated toward the 'militant middle ground' where, as an empathetic listener, she could hear, see and understand best. From this vantage point, she turned her sharp critical eye to seeing and understanding manifestations of religiosity and belief in all their forms. There was quite a bit of dexterity in her empathetic imagining among the interlocutors she encountered during her research. Along with Russian missionaries in Alaska (Luehrmann 2008), she wrote about secularism and those who advocated atheism in the USSR (Luehrmann 2011, 2015). She was a practicing Christian and referred to her own faith tradition as 'rationalist', and yet she studied the sensory practices of Eastern Christianity (Luehrmann 2017). She was devoted to her three children, and yet she did research among women who had multiple abortions and, either by choice or circumstance, relinquished motherhood (Luehrmann 2019).

It was her positioning in the militant middle ground that allowed her to accept those who held ardent religious convictions along with those who were indifferent and those who made a career out of their hostility to institutional religion. She could discuss engagement with the tenets of religious doctrine as easily as she could antireligious campaigns. By standing in the middle and occupying the militant middle ground, she was able to turn her gaze a full 360 degrees and engage those she met in the archives and on pilgrimage. This perspective from the calm eye of the storm allowed Sonja Luehrmann to offer novel perspectives and insight on the vast changes that beset Russians throughout the course of the twentieth-century and continuing even today. Through this openness and non-judgmental engagement from the militant middle ground, she offered us a portrait of religious life and the politics of religion in Russia.

If one of the goals of ethnography is to gain insight to the experiences of others, how is this best achieved? What is involved when one person tries to grasp another's subjective

experience? Occupying the militant middle ground as a means to gain perspective is an excellent first step, but it is only a beginning. A growing group of anthropologists have noted the fundamental – and often entirely unexamined – role that empathy plays in further shaping ethnographic encounters (Strauss 2004, 433; Hollan 2008, 488; Hollan and Throop 2008, 385). The German word for ‘empathy’, *Einfühlung*, literally means ‘feeling yourself into someone or something’. Colloquially, we tend to equate empathy with shared emotional states and the potential this yields for understanding others. Claudia Strauss builds on this notion and succinctly offers a definition of empathy as ‘a sympathetic affective response, based on awareness or imaginative reconstruction of another’s feelings’. By ‘sympathetic affective response’, she means sympathy as a blend of commiseration and ‘fellow feeling’ (Strauss 2004, 434).

Still, the question remains, how does one, in the course of ethnographic research with someone very different from oneself, generate such a ‘sympathetic affective response’ so as to co-feel and initiate empathetic processes leading to insight of another’s life experiences? Jodi Halpern argues that neither ‘detached cognition’ nor ‘sympathetic merging’ leads to an experiential understanding of another person’s distinct emotional perspective, which, in her view, is the goal of empathy (Halpern 2001, 68). Rather, she sees empathy is an imaginative process that requires making an effort to understand as well as an effort to be willing to be understood. The empathetic imagination of the anthropologist is guided by her own associations in the form of memories, images, sounds and so on. It is her own repertoire of associations that guide the empathetic understanding of another.

However, the potential is ever-present to project one’s own unacknowledged emotions, assumptions and understandings on to another and thereby impede understanding. If a listener can self-consciously and self-critically use her own emotional associations to provide context, Halpern suggests, then the benefits of imagining the distinct experiences of another person can heighten the prospects for insightful dialogue and exchange, even when they take place between unlikely candidates. This makes empathy a form of emotional reasoning, engendered by moving away from one’s own positionality to the middle ground, and imaginatively engaging another with the goal of understanding and allowing oneself to be understood.

Not everyone is willing to be understood, however, and Sonja encountered many such people. An essential aspect of the ethnographic encounter is trust. An anthropologist must engender enough trust so that the reluctant, shy or hesitant interlocutor will be willing to be understood. This two-sided willingness is what makes possible the prospect of empathetic understanding, not only of a person’s emotional palette but also the origins of that palette. We know that we can never directly access another person’s experience. Yet, the illusionary aspects of gaining insight through empathy trade on the felt presence of trust, which gives the illusion its agentic powers.

By moving away from one’s own positionality and non-judgmentally listening, a basis of trust can be created. This has the potential to release imaginative capabilities to envision the experiences of the other. In order for ethnographic insight to be gleaned, a sympathetic affective response in the course of dialogue between someone who seeks to understand and someone who can still imagine being understood must combine with emotional and cognitive elements in this imaginative process of ‘feeling into someone or something’ (Strauss 2004, 434; Hollan 2008, 484).

Beyond Sonja’s intellectual rigour, which has been widely noted, it is the combination of her empathetic approach with a wide-ranging perspective from the militant middle ground

that I think most of all set Sonja apart in the field of Slavic Studies. It is also what made her a natural anthropologist. Her anchoring in the empathetic middle was a source of her passion and curiosity, not only for anthropology and anthropological theory but also for her choice to live as an anthropologist. For Sonja, everyone was an interlocutor. Everywhere was a field site. There were no natives and foreigners, just fellow sojourners.

Having said that, throughout her career, Sonja conducted archival research as frequently as she did ethnographic research. Franz Boas, the German-born ‘father’ of American anthropology, would certainly have approved of her commitment to historically contextualizing contemporary social dynamics. This is what made Sonja as at home in the archives, mining texts for meaning, parsing words, and analysing the genealogy of rhetorical concepts, as much as she was committed to being a participant in long Orthodox pilgrimages talking to people about sensitive and intimate subjects. As someone who has also tried to bridge the scholarly penchant for bracketing out the Soviet period from the ‘post-Soviet’ one, I have vast appreciation for Sonja’s intellectual adroitness that allowed her to harness multiple methods, wide-ranging concepts and a plethora of disciplinary and theoretical schools to study religion in the broadest sense of the word in the most holistic temporal and spatial framing possible. This willingness to neither assume nor exclude also went into the construction of her militant middle ground empathetic positioning as an ethnographer.

Globally, we are experiencing a period when there is a decisive lack of empathy for the other. The middle ground is vanishing under pressure from those who militantly hold polarized and often inflexible positions at the edges. As a result, empathy for the other is smothered. In addition to her gentle spirit, I hope most of all that Sonja’s example of practicing empathy as she held the militant middle ground, in life as in ethnography, will be her lasting gift to us all.

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Everyday miracles

Kristen Ghodsee

The fields of Soviet and Russian history and anthropology lost a brilliant and dedicated scholar in August 2019. Although her life was cut short by cancer, Sonja Luehrmann's intellectual impact on her field has been and no doubt will continue to be enormous. Through her keen ethnographic observations of the nuanced interplay of religious and atheist discourses, her diligent attention to archival sources, and her sophisticated theoretical analysis, she radically reshaped our understandings of the unique afterlives of Soviet atheism and how these legacies later influenced post-Soviet Russian Orthodox religious practices.

Although I knew and respected Sonja's work from the publication of her excellent book, *Secularism Soviet Style* in 2011, I did not get to know her personally until she lived in the apartment above me during the spring and summer of 2016. We were both visiting fellows at institutions in Helsinki, Finland, and had relocated with our families: me with my daughter and Sonja with her husband, Ilya Vinkovetsky and their two children: Philipp and Vera. When I arrived, Sonja was more than six months pregnant with her third child, and she was working on a new project about Russian anti-abortion activists.

The Töölö Towers, where we lived, was a renovated building that had once been a Finnish mental institution, and it encouraged a unique level of sociality among its residents. Breakfast was included in our rent, and each morning my daughter and I would traipse down to the canteen (always just moments before they closed), and would occasionally find Sonja sitting alone or with one of her children. As academic mothers, we gravitated to each other and always shared a table. My daughter (who was 14 at the time) adored Vera (who was about five) and was happy enough to engage Vera in games so Sonja and I could talk shop.

It was over these spontaneous breakfast conversations and a few shared dinners in our apartments that I got to know Sonja not only as a scholar and colleague but as a woman with boundless energy and tireless patience. She had a sparkling and incisive mind and knew her field backwards and forwards, but she lacked the arrogance that often marks those with extreme intellectual abilities. Sonja's down-to-earth German frankness meant that she suffered no fools, and I valued her thoughts and opinions because she was always honest and straightforward in her assessments.

We often compared fieldwork experiences – hers in Russia and mine in Bulgaria – and talked about the importance of combining participant observation with careful archival research. Her third book, *Religion in the Secular Archives* (2015), had just come out, and she regaled me with stories of the archives she had visited and how viewing religion and religious groups through atheist sources produced an important perspective that is often missed in religious studies. Sonja approached the archives as an ethnographic object and asked poignant questions about how historians might unwittingly reproduce the biases of the political regimes that created archival collections.

At that time, I was writing and editing the manuscript that would later become the book *Second World, Second Sex*. I was also working in the Bulgarian Central State Archives while conducting oral history interviews with septa-, octa- and nonagenarian women who had been members of the communist-era Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement (CBWM). I was struggling to find the right narrative framing for what I felt were the

subjective views of my interview subjects with the supposedly more objective view produced through my reading of the archival materials. Sonja shared her experiences of working in the Soviet archives, and it was in my discussions with her that I more fully realized that archives were subjective too, a collection of documents curated by governments with specific perspectives and goals. Sonja's careful attention to the production and reproduction of historical knowledge is an essential intervention, and her book and articles should be required reading for all historians and anthropologists.

Sonja was also a generous teacher, colleague, and mentor, and she continued working and travelling until the very end. There is a video on YouTube of Sonja giving a keynote address at the 17th annual conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR), which took place in Tartu, Estonia from June 25–29, 2019, just two months before her death. She is wearing a lovely light blue dress with a white floral scarf, and she seems as poised and calm as she was when I knew her in Helsinki before her cancer diagnosis. As she introduces her talk, she says she has two caveats before she begins. The first is that she will use the term 'post-Soviet' and that her research experience is mostly in Russia. The second is that she will be speaking about different religious traditions and she doesn't want anyone to think that she is treating them interchangeably, but that she is trying to represent the perspective of her atheistic subjects who see all religions similarly in their opposition to atheism.

What she does not say, and indeed what you would never be able to guess from watching the video, is that she was quite literally dying and had only eight weeks to live. I am incredulous at how she could stand up at a podium in front of a room full of people, thousands of miles away from her doctors, and so calmly deliver a keynote address on the importance of understanding the uniqueness of religious experience after socialism. I encourage everyone to watch this video of her June 2019 keynote address and ask yourself if you would be able to do what she did, to be so gracious with her attention and intellect, smiling as she answered questions from the audience, knowing that her remaining time was limited. But that was Sonja, the anthropologist and scholar until the very end.

After leaving Helsinki in July 2016, I moved back to the United States and Sonja and her family back to Canada. The chaos of ordinary life overwhelmed me, and we lost touch. I never saw her again after those months we shared in Finland, but I have an image of her in the breakfast room on the ground floor of the Töölö Towers. She had returned from the hospital and was sitting at a table cradling her newborn son, Lukas. Sonja looked tired but happy and glowed with the magic of having just brought another human being into the world. For other parents, there is something both sentimental and transcendent about watching a mother gaze down lovingly at her new baby; it instantly returns you to that precious moment when you first held your own child – so tiny and helpless – in your arms.

I remember watching her that morning in the Töölö Towers as I waited for my bread to toast. At that moment Sonja seemed to radiate life, love, and hope in all directions. One doesn't need religion for miracles, I thought, they happen every day.

Although she left us far too soon and will be sorely missed, her light will continue to shine – through her children, through her colleagues and students, and especially through her scholarship and writing, which will touch the lives of those who will never get the chance to meet her for generations to come.

'Soviet Secularism,' Russian Orthodoxy, and 'the Orthodox World': work left undone, conversations left unfinished

Vera Shevzov

A pioneer in the field of late-Soviet atheism and its impact on subsequent post-Soviet religious sensibilities, Sonja Luehrmann helped to contextualize and problematize the oversimplified conclusions which often result from statistical reports about the impressive numbers of self-identified Orthodox Christians in contemporary Russia.¹ A self-identified anthropologist-historian, Sonja was dedicated to documenting lived religion, including Orthodox Christianity, as it emerged from within a society shaped by some 70 years of relentless anti-religious policies and atheist 'training'. She pursued this work with the passion of a calling.

Sonja's work on atheism and religion in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, however, has significant implications for the broader 'Orthodox [Christian] world'. With the collapse of communism in Eastern European countries in 1989 and the unravelling of the Soviet Union in 1992, a newly imagined geopolitical bloc known as 'the Orthodox world' gained increasing public prominence. While this geopolitical construct overlaps with the transnational, culturally diverse, and historically fragmented 'Orthodox world' as its adherents see it, it is not synonymous with the latter. For its more than 260 million adherents worldwide, the Orthodox Christian world transcends the borders of the 18 countries usually grouped within this geopolitical bloc to include individuals and communities scattered across continents.

Despite distinct genealogies, concerns, and priorities, the Orthodox world as a Western geopolitical construct and the Orthodox world as imagined by its adherents have increasingly shared a preoccupation with post-Soviet Russia (though for different reasons). At the same time, however, both 'outsiders' and 'insiders' to this world also share an often striking lack of knowledge with respect to the formative historical and cultural pasts of the diverse communities inhabiting this seemingly monolithic world. Indeed, the ethnically diverse peoples and scattered faith communities who consider themselves Orthodox insiders are often as uninformed – or misinformed – about the historical experiences that define the collective memories and interpretive frames of fellow Orthodox Christians, as are self-perceived outsiders to this world.

Until her untimely death, Sonja was among only a handful of scholars whose research and tireless fieldwork in both remote and central urban areas of post-Soviet Russia offered invaluable, constructively-critical, and thought-provoking insights for those seeking to understand internal tensions within today's 'Orthodox world'. Given her years of indefatigable research and fieldwork, what were some of Sonja's takeaways for those whose interests in contemporary Russia link to broader stakes in a conceived 'Orthodox world?'

First, contrary to those who proclaimed the Soviet atheist experiment a failure in light of rapid religious revival in the 1990s, Sonja maintained otherwise. Despite the unravelling of the Soviet communist regime, Sonja argued that its atheist project had 'substantive impact', leaving an 'imprint on who people were and how they interacted with the world' (Luehrmann 2019), even as they may have chosen to identify as Orthodox Christians, or with any other faith tradition. Although not ignoring the potential long-term

impact of widespread atrocities and violence that accompanied Soviet ‘forced secularization’ in the 1920s and 1930s – a topic to which she may have eventually turned in more depth – Sonja’s work focused more on the generations that came of age in the post-war Soviet Union, beginning in the 1960s. This was a landmark period in her estimation, since, by this time, atheism had become the ‘normative way of being’ (Luehrmann 2016, 80). In contrast to those who might attribute the post-Soviet Orthodox revival either to late-Soviet religious searches among urban intellectuals, Soviet dissidents, or any potentially-existing networks of underground faith communities, Sonja looked instead to the lived experiences of active proponents of atheism who subsequently became the newly-converted religious activists in the early post-Soviet period (Luehrmann 2005, 2011). In doing so, she reminds us that post-Soviet Orthodox Christianity was intertwined with Soviet atheism in complex and not always immediately evident ways. To understand contemporary Russia’s Orthodox actors and lived expressions of Orthodox identity, one needs to understand not only Russia’s imperial past – and its Byzantine past – but also the intricacies of the Soviet atheist past as well. To view post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy and its sincere adherents in isolation – as if the Soviet experiment never happened – can result in misunderstandings, misconceptions, or sheer bewilderment.

Second, Sonja also reminds us that state-enforced atheism in the Soviet Union ‘always meant dealing with religions in the plural, something that is easily overlooked in studies that focus on the relationship between the Soviet state and single denominations’ (Luehrmann 2015, 27). Indeed, her fieldwork in a religiously diverse national republic in contemporary Russia showed that different faith traditions experienced the impact of the atheist past in remarkably similar ways. Moreover, that past bonded peoples of different religious faiths in unique, new ways. In terms of Orthodox Christianity, Sonja’s observations help to explain the inter-confessional relationships in post-Soviet Russia that sometime baffle western observers.

Finally, Sonja was aware of the shortcomings and potential hazards of using terms common to American and Western European discourse to name seemingly similar or analogous phenomena in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. In applying the fraught term ‘secularism’ to describe the ‘Soviet experiment’ – with its militant commitment to creating a ‘new’, ‘godless’ person – Sonja, for instance, repeatedly defined and explicated her use of the word so as not to ‘bedevil cross-cultural discussions’ on this topic (Taylor 2011, 31; Luehrmann 2017d).

Similarly, her more recent project on grassroots anti-abortion activities among post-Soviet Russian Orthodox women reveals complex, existential realities easily misconstrued or simply effaced by an uncritical application of terms from western-inspired, neo-conservative global discourse. Contextualizing this politically-charged activism on the backdrop of the Soviet past – during which abortion was used as the most readily available and most reliable form of contraception – Sonja highlights the paradoxes of Russian Orthodox women’s pro-life sensibilities that make for a ‘distinctive activist scene’ (Luehrmann 2017b, 119). Contrary to conventional thinking, Sonja reminds us that newly-converted grassroots activists predate Vladimir Putin’s measures to reverse birth rates after he became president in 2000. These activists emerged in the early post-Soviet years from a generation of women who had come of age in the twilight of the Soviet Union, when the average woman had five abortions during her lifetime. Turning to Orthodoxy following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, these women (often already in their post-reproductive

years) found themselves in a new life context that gave moral meaning and different weight to an action they previously considered commonplace. Sonja found that few women, having lived their young reproductive lives in the Soviet regime, 'rarely spoke of abortion in strongly agentive terms as a 'choice or a 'decision" (Luehrmann 2017a, 168). Instead, decades later, they remembered it as a 'necessity,' and as 'one of the inevitable hardships of women's lives [under the Soviet regime-VS] rather than a marker of gender equality' (Luehrmann 2017b, 106).

First-hand interaction with Orthodox women in several regions throughout Russia, as well as observation of abortion-related rituals, enabled Sonja to see that her subject of study was linked more with other, seemingly unrelated, post-Soviet, post-atheist Russian cultural trends than with its Western counterpart. Women whom Sonja encountered often re-imagined the mass abortions of the Soviet past in terms of 'grievable victims', analogous to countless other unnamed victims of Soviet-era state violence (Luehrmann 2017c). By viewing post-Soviet women's anti-abortion activities in the context of what appears to be a singular, transnational conservative Christian discourse, Sonja suggests that we miss seeing deeper, and more complex, anthropological currents at work – currents which defy neat classifications, and which demand a closer look. Indeed, if as a historically-informed anthropologist Sonja left one main takeaway for those interested in contemporary Russia and its connections with the broader 'Orthodox world', it is that 'more is going on here [in contemporary Russia] than just religious conservatism' (Luehrmann 2019). And the key to understanding that 'more' lies in the complex and still little understood legacy and long-term impact of the Soviet past.

Unfortunately, in contrast to many of her other colleagues who enjoyed years of interaction with her, I met Sonja relatively late in her too-short life. She had been my intellectual interlocutor for years before we finally met in person in April 2017 – close to the time of her diagnosis – at a workshop I hosted at Smith College on the topic 'God after Gulag: Memory and 'Ultimate Questions' in Post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy'. During those two days of intense discussion, and subsequently, over precious dinners and conversations at conferences and workshops over the course of the next two years, I came to know that Sonja in-person was even more delightfully witty, deeply reflective, and interpretively challenging than the Sonja I had known on paper, through books and articles. I also realized that what made her 'one of the few' was not merely her erudition. It was also her rare ability to self-question that comes with recognition of the ways in which one is an 'outsider' – (we need only to recall her account of marking herself as an outsider by purchasing and offering to share sausage with others during a pilgrimage with observant participants who abstained from meat and alcohol (Luehrmann 2017a, 177)) – and her unique awareness that genuine understanding involves 'ways of being attentive' that are 'a virtue incumbent on the observer' (Luehrmann 2011).

My final comment is for her children, Philipp, Vera, and Lukas, who someday may read this. Please know that not every scholar wins the hearts or gains the admiration of colleagues as did your mother. She was an exceptional person. Please also know that in the time I knew her, no conversation ever passed without an enlivened discussion about you. Given the way she spoke, I am sure she hoped that each of you would grow to share the joys, and the burdens, that the art of discernment brings. You were always her co-travellers.

Note

1. According to a 2017 Pew research study, more than 100 million of today's 260 million Orthodox Christians worldwide reside in Russia. "Orthodox Christianity in the Twenty-First Century." See <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/08/orthodox-christianity-in-the-21st-century/>

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